



**MINISTER
BASIC EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**Speech by the Minister of Basic Education, Ms Siviwe Gwarube
On the Occasion of the Release of the 2025 National Senior Certificate
Results**

“A New Course for Basic Education: Root-Deep Reform, Learning First”

Programme Director,

Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers, Premiers and MECs, Members of Parliament
and Provincial Legislatures,

The Chairperson, Council and CEO of Umalusi,

Leaders of educator unions and SGB associations,

Our partners from civil society, academia, business and our sponsors,

Educators, parents and learners, members of the media,

And South Africans watching at home,

Molweni, good evening.

Today we honour the Class of 2025 – and the families, teachers and communities who carried them to this moment. And we affirm our trust in the credibility of the National Senior Certificate results that have been checked and approved by Umalusi.

Tonight I want to speak plainly about what these results tell us about the health of our system – where we are progressing, and where we must act with urgency to lift quality and strengthen equity.

And then, at the end of my remarks, I will announce the national results and provincial outcomes – so we can receive the numbers with clarity and respond with purpose.

These are the second NSC results released in South Africa's new era of multi-party government. Twenty months ago, in May 2024, South Africans chose cooperation over division – maturity over instability – shared responsibility over blame.

From that choice came the Government of National Unity: to strengthen institutions, grow the economy, and create jobs.

And what matters most is this: even as power shifted, our country did not splinter. We proved we can renew ourselves without collapse – change without chaos – and work together in the national interest.

Education sits at the centre of that national project, because our future is formed in classrooms long before it is debated.

The Department of Basic Education is charting a new path. We do so with humility – and with gratitude for those who came before.

We honour our predecessors in this office, including:

- Professor Sibusiso Bengu, democratic South Africa's first Minister of Education, who helped lay key legislative and policy foundations for our system; and
- Former Ministers Kader Asmal, Naledi Pandor and Angie Motshekga.

Yes, the path ahead requires new energy, fresh choices and different priorities, but we do not begin from nothing: we are building from where they left off.

When I assumed office eighteen months ago, I did so with a clear understanding of the terrain before us.

Education has long carried a particular weight in our national story, shaping opportunity and social mobility across generations. The system we steward today reflects both that history and the unfinished work of building a more equitable future.

It bears the imprint of deep inequality, yet it remains the most powerful instrument we have for expanding opportunity and strengthening social cohesion.

South Africans,

We cannot be content to keep the system running while its deepest problems remain untouched. We must choose a new course for basic education.

And that new course has already begun: it is a root-deep reform, guided by evidence and our relentless focus on what matters most – quality learning and teaching.

In our first year in office, the work of the Department was guided by one central question: what must change if education is to become the great equaliser it promises to be – not in rhetoric, but in lived reality?

Over the past year, we have:

- worked to stabilise governance across the system;
- rebuilt trust with provinces, districts, unions and partners;
- protected the fairness and credibility of national exams; and
- shifted the Department's focus away from reactive crisis management toward long-term, strategic reform.

To understand the scale of what we are reforming, we must understand its size.

Our system serves approximately 13.5 million learners, supported by more than 460 000 educators, across nearly 25 000 schools, managed through hundreds of circuit offices, 75 education districts and nine provincial departments.

People ask about “quick wins”. But real reform in a system this size cannot be PR-led. It is deep work that succeeds only when leadership lines up resources, accountability, trust and data behind one clear direction: strengthening the foundations of learning.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The NSC remains one of the largest and most complex operations – surpassed only by national elections.

In 2025, more than 900,000 candidates wrote at about 6,000 centres – millions of scripts set, printed, written, marked, checked and quality-assured.

Where irregularities appeared, they were investigated and dealt with. Where weaknesses were found, we strengthened controls and consequence management.

We can have confidence: these results are earned, not gifted.

South Africans, we must also put a stubborn myth to rest: 30% is not “the matric pass mark”.

The NSC is earned by meeting minimum requirements across a full subject package – including higher thresholds in key subjects, with different pass types that open different pathways after school.

In turn, learners need to achieve the right marks in the right subjects in the NSC exams to gain entry into their preferred programme at a higher education level.

The point is this: Slogans or percentages alone will *not* improve learner outcomes. It is whether our standards, progression and support across the whole schooling journey add up to real readiness.

That is why the National Education and Training Council – the NETC, established last year for the first time in our history – is reviewing assessment and progression policies across Grades R to 12, so that expectations are clear, support happens earlier, and learning gaps do not compound until learners arrive in matric.

Raising the bar in Grade 12 imposes a moral obligation to strengthen the foundations: school readiness, early learning, reading for meaning by age ten, and early numeracy.

When we speak about the NSC, we must therefore resist viewing it as a single moment in time. Matric is not an event – it is a journey that spans more than a decade.

Many learners pursue this milestone under real strain – poverty and hunger, unsafe environments, long travel, language barriers, overcrowded classrooms and uneven resources.

These realities shape performance long before the first exam paper is written – and they are why quality and equity cannot be separated.

And yet there is hope – because, every year, in no-fee schools across South Africa, children carrying heavy burdens still walk into classrooms and choose to pursue excellence.

They study by candlelight. They share textbooks. They travel far. They keep going.

And when that determination meets dedicated teaching, committed school leadership and a district that supports its schools, the results can be extraordinary.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 2025, we accelerated the work of turning the system toward its foundations.

In doing so, we have drawn inspiration from an enduring symbol of our land – the Baobab tree.

The Baobab does not grow quickly or rush skyward. It first grows downward, pushing its roots deep into difficult soil, surviving droughts and storms. Only later does it rise – offering shelter, nourishment, relief and stability for generations.

No tree grows tall when its roots are weak – and no education system transforms a nation while its foundations are weak.

For decades, South Africa rightly focused on expanding access to education. That work was necessary and just. But access without quality is not equality, and progression without mastery is not opportunity.

Quality is measured by what learners can do, and by whether opportunity stays open in gateway subjects.

If education is to be the equaliser of opportunity, then a child born in Soweto and a child born in Sandton must receive, at the start of their learning journey, an equal education that

equips them to read with meaning, to count confidently and to imagine their future without limitation.

The greatest injustice in our system is not found at Grade 12. It is found much earlier – and it is visible in a familiar story I often cite: it is the tale of the two ten-year-olds.

The first is Lindiwe, she grows up in a home with age-appropriate books, she's read to from the age of two, she is enrolled in a registered ECD centre with trained practitioners, nutritious meals and supportive caregivers who identify her needs early. By Grade 1 she arrives ready and confident – and at ten, she is reading and writing independently and solving maths problems with confidence. The future is wide open to her.

Sipho, who is also ten, grows up in a poor community with no books at home, he does not attend any ECD programme. He interacts with a book for the first time when he starts Grade 1. By Grade 4 he still struggles to read, write and count with meaning – not because he lacks potential, but because he has weak foundations of learning because of a system that did not prioritise the right things.

Lindiwe and Sipho are the faces of education inequality – and that is why the greatest injustice is found early:

- in children not thriving by five;
- in learners unable to read for meaning by ten; and
- in early numeracy gaps that later close the door to Maths and Science.

The Thrive by Five Index we released last September indicates that only 42% of children aged 4 to 5 are developmentally “on track”. Too many children start school already behind – and that gap compounds each year.

It is this reality that underpins the reforms underway to improve the quality of learning.

We said we would change the direction of the system – toward early learning in the years when inequality either takes root or is dismantled. Over the past year, we have done exactly that.

First, we are strengthening early learning – expanding access while driving quality and readiness. As Early Childhood Care and Education consolidates into the Department, we have put quality and readiness at the centre.

Siyayazi ukuba le – sector iphethwe ngooMama, ooMakhulu, Tannies and aunts. Nini abayiqinisileyo, nayakha ezilalini, ezilokishini nase zidolophini. Yiyolonto singurhulumente asizanga uzoyixutho, sizonixhasa.

We are backing practitioners with clearer curriculum guidance, stronger professional development and quality-improvement pathways that do not exclude the poorest.

We set an ambitious target to register 10,000 ECD centres in 2025 – and exceeded it. More than 12,000 centres were registered in 2025, bringing the total registered to over 33,000. This enables more than a million children to access the subsidy that supports nutrition and quality early learning.

To expand access in our rural provinces, we established an Outcomes Based Education Fund. Through this, we are investing R496 million to expand safe, quality early learning and to create over 100,000 new learner spaces in Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

We have now set a new ambitious target to create 250,000 new ECD spaces by next year!

Second, we are strengthening early grade reading using evidence. In November 2025 we released the first-ever Funda Uphumelele National Survey.

This is also where language matters: Funda Uphumelele helps us see where reading breaks down; Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education helps us fix it.

That is why we are expanding Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education — and in November 2025, South Africa wrote its first bilingual Grade 4 assessments in Mathematics and Natural Science.

Third, we are improving the tools and conditions for learning in the earliest grades.

We are finalising an updated National Catalogue of Learning and Teaching Support Materials for Grades 1 to 3, strengthening last-mile delivery, and defining a core support package of the “non-negotiables” every Foundation Phase classroom should have.

For the first time in over two decades, we have launched a review of the formula for allocating teaching posts to schools, so it reflects today’s pressures, including overcrowding, curriculum demands and the expansion of early learning.

With Grade R now compulsory, we will continue to expand access and improve quality, with a focus on infrastructure, practitioner development and learning materials in poor communities. We are currently upskilling 7,000 Grade R practitioners through a joint project with UNISA – backing this strategy with real investment.

Our shift in focus towards the foundations of learning is gaining international recognition. Our efforts to establish an IBSA Network for Quality Foundational Learning have been endorsed by the Heads of State of India, Brazil and South Africa.

Fourth, we are strengthening teacher development in practical ways that protect learning time – including prioritising bursaries for Foundation Phase student-teachers through Funza Lushaka.

Finally, we are treating child well-being and safety as a priority, because children cannot learn when they are hungry or unsafe.

We are strengthening the National School Nutrition Programme and improving accountability, procurement and monitoring. We are also piloting an ECD nutrition programme to prevent child stunting caused by malnutrition.

In June 2025, we strengthened the School Safety Protocol with SAPS. And in the first term of 2026, I will kick off an Anti-Bullying Campaign with MECs to intensify prevention, reporting and response at school level.

This year, we will finalise the review of White Paper 6 on inclusive education, so that learning barriers are identified early and support reaches learners where vulnerability is highest.

We are also streamlining reporting tools to remove duplication. Reporting must serve teaching – not paperwork for the sake of paperwork.

And for the first time since 1994, we have undertaken a financial analysis of provincial education budgets. Seven of nine provinces were flagged as financially unsustainable, and provinces were asked to develop Financial Recovery Plans. This work is also supported by a drive to eliminate ghost teachers and learners.

For teachers, this is what this means in practice: clearer guidance in the early grades, better materials getting to classrooms, less duplicate reporting, and stronger support to protect learning time – especially in the Foundation Phase.

Let me now turn to what the country has been waiting for: the 2025 NSC results.

Before I announce the national and provincial pass rates, let me share what these results are telling us – because the numbers matter most when we understand what sits behind them.

This was the largest class in history to sit for the final matric exams. We are reaching more learners in Grade 12 than at any other point in decades.

However, quantity is only the starting point. The next phase is about *quality*: making sure that access translates into learning, and learning translates into stronger outcomes, especially in gateway subjects.

The story of the Class of 2025 begins in 2014. It is a story of resilience: of young people who kept going through difficult seasons.

In 2014, 1.2 million children entered Grade 1. By the time that same cohort reached Grade 10 in 2023, a decrease of around 4% was noted. We therefore have very high retention rates between Grade 1 and Grade 10.

However, between Grades 10 and 12, a large number of learners begin to repeat, others even leave the school system. The full-time Grade 12 class of 2025 had around 778,000 learners enrolled.

This tells us something important: the largest dropout pressure is not across the whole system – it intensifies late, as learners move into Grades 11 and 12.

Nationally, only about 84% make it from Grade 10 to Grade 11, and about 78% from Grade 11 to Grade 12.

And that is why learner retention matters: if learners exit the system before Grade 12, the system is not yet delivering quality at scale – regardless of how strong the final pass rate is.

Where we see lower learner retention alongside higher performance, we must question that pattern carefully and fairly – using data, not assumptions.

This is about protecting learners and honest schools – and ensuring that no one is pressured to improve statistics by closing doors to opportunity.

If any learner is being discouraged, diverted or left without support – whether out of Grade 12 entirely or out of gateway subjects – then we must find it, stop it and replace it with earlier support that keeps opportunity open.

And we must continue strengthening learner tracking and early warnings with Higher Education and Training, so support and intervention happen long before Grade 12.

And that is why our biggest system-health test is not only the pass rate, but whether learners stay the course from the early grades through to Grade 12.

The data also shows a more stable system. The largest share of candidates were 18 years old – a sign of on-time progression. The percentage of learners who were unable to sit for any their exam papers has fallen sharply, from around 17% in 2017 to around 2% today.

Part-time repeat candidate numbers have also declined, reflecting a lower number of candidates seeking to repeat Grade 12, given the improved performance.

These trends matter because they point to a more stable system – and stability is the platform on which quality must now rise.

Girls now outnumber boys by 56% to 44%, reflecting stronger protections for the girl child, including the removal of pregnancy as a barrier to education.

But the boy child is increasingly being left behind, becoming underrepresented in Matric cohorts and less likely than girls to return through second-chance pathways. This imbalance requires urgent and targeted intervention.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Subject choices by the Class of 2025 remind us again of the long reach of weak foundations.

Only 34% of candidates wrote Mathematics, while most wrote Mathematical Literacy. This is concerning as Mathematics is an important gateway subject.

We are encouraged by enrolment increases in Mathematics and other key gateway subjects, like Accounting and Physical Science, as well as in technical subjects. Although these gains were minor, they represent a turning of the tide.

In other words, the system is growing – but not fast enough in the subjects that most powerfully shape access to further study, scarce skills and economic participation. That is the quality challenge of the next phase.

And this brings us to the second truth we must face: more learners writing doesn't always mean better results.

The 2025 NSC results show this, as we saw that the number of learners who took Mathematics in 2025 increased but we saw a drop in their performance.

This is a lesson for the country: if we want to widen the gateway pathway, we must ensure that learners have the foundational skills required to take on these gateway subjects successfully.

A healthy system must grow the number of learners taking Mathematics and Physical Science without sacrificing quality. That is why our next phase pairs higher participation with stronger support – better materials, targeted teacher development, and earlier intervention so learners arrive in these subjects ready to succeed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Inclusive education is another important quality test. The number of learners with special learning needs enrolling for the NSC exams has improved, increasing by 57%.

The progress is not only in participation, but in achievement. Significantly more learners with special education needs wrote, passed, and achieved admission to Bachelor studies in 2025.

The biggest increases were recorded in the Free State and Western Cape. We will continue to work with the other provinces to achieve similar increases.

Challenges remain in ensuring that South African Sign Language is widely accessible as a language of learning and teaching. We currently have too few trained specialists to teach gateway subjects through sign language. This requires careful attention.

In a country committed to dignity, inclusion cannot stop at writing an exam paper. It must extend to access to the full curriculum – including gateway subjects.

We must also look at the quality of passes being achieved, because that is where post-school opportunity is shaped. Here we look at passes that open doors to Bachelor studies, Diploma studies and Higher Certificate studies.

While the national percentage of what we will call Bachelor passes decreased slightly from around 48% to 46%, more candidates than ever before achieved Bachelor passes, increasing by 8 700 to over 345,000 learners.

A further 28% achieved Diploma passes, and 13.5% achieved Higher Certificate passes.

This is why quality matters: it tells us not only how many learners crossed the line, but how well-prepared they are for what comes next.

For the first time, all 75 school districts have achieved a pass rate of 80% and above. District performance is one of our clearest quality indicators – because it shows whether improvement is spreading system-wide or remaining concentrated in pockets of strength.

We are building stability – but the struggle for quality must now intensify, especially in gateway subjects.

The Accounting pass rate decreased from 81% to 78%, while the Mathematics pass rate decreased from 69% to 64%. There was, however, an increase in Physical Science pass rate from 76% to 77%.

This year we recorded fewer distinctions in Accounting, Mathematics and Physical Science than those recorded in 2024.

So, as we celebrate, we do so with clear eyes.

The next phase is about deeper mastery – especially in gateway subjects.

It is about increasing the number of learners taking and excelling in Mathematics, Physical Science and other gateway subjects *with support*, so opportunity expands without quality collapsing.

And when we speak about equity, we are speaking about quality too.

The 2025 results show us that excellence is spreading into communities that have carried the heaviest burdens – but they also remind us that the number of learners enrolling should never run ahead of our ability to ensure that they perform well.

Our responsibility is to protect what is working and deepen it so that achievement becomes durable, and so that progress is not measured by who gets through, but by how well learners are prepared to thrive beyond the school gate.

We also see something else in these results – something that South Africa can be proud of, especially when life is hard and hope is sometimes in short supply.

In township and rural communities – in no-fee schools – excellence is becoming a pattern. This year, we saw sustained growth in the number of learners from no-fee schools achieving Bachelor passes. That is a national message of hope. Poverty is not destiny.

For many of these young people, Bachelor passes will not just open a door – it will change a family's story. It may mean the first university graduate in that home. The first teacher, lawyer, doctor, engineer or scientist in that family line. The first person able to break a cycle that has held generations back.

And we see what is possible when schools are supported and districts are strong. Districts like uMkhanyakude and Umlazi remind us that outstanding outcomes can come from communities overwhelmed by lack and need.

Over 66% of Bachelor passes were obtained by candidates from no-fee schools, and more no-fee schools are achieving pass rates between 80% and 100%. Our task now is to protect what is working, deepen it and make it durable.

And finally, we cannot separate education outcomes from learner well-being.

While more social grant beneficiaries wrote the NSC exams in 2025, 78% of these candidates passed, down from 86% previously. That drop – despite more learners writing – is a warning that must be understood and addressed.

Candidates with social grants performed better than candidates whose social grants had become inactive after reaching 18 years, highlighting the importance of social protection to learner performance.

Social protection and education outcomes are linked – and we will engage this urgently with the Department of Social Development to find ways of ensuring that Grade 12 learners don't have their social grants discontinued during this important academic year.

When we speak about “deep roots”, we speak about the whole ecosystem that makes learning possible.

And now, South Africa, having honoured the work and faced the truth behind the numbers – let us come to the results themselves.

In 2025, over 656,000 learners passed the National Senior Certificate.

That figure carries the effort of teachers, learners and families in every corner of our country – so let us now turn to the provincial results:

In ninth place, the Eastern Cape achieved a pass rate of 84.17%.

In eighth place, Limpopo increased to 86.15%.

In seventh place, Mpumalanga achieved a pass rate of 86.55%.

In sixth place, the Northern Cape achieved a pass rate of 87.79% - marking the biggest improvement of all the provinces.

In fifth place, the Western Cape achieved a pass rate of 88.20%.

In fourth place, North West achieved a pass rate of 88.49%.

In third place, Gauteng achieved a pass rate of 89.06%.

In second place, the Free State achieved a pass rate of 89.33%.

And the best performing province is KwaZulu-Natal with a pass rate of 90.6%.

Nationally, the NSC pass rate is 88% - an increase of around 0.7% from 2024.

88% is the highest pass rate in our country's history.

To every Premier, every MEC, every Head of Department, every district director, every principal, and every teacher: these outcomes are built day by day, term by term, year by year – and we honour the work behind them.

Even as we celebrate progress, we have been honest about the risks ahead.

Austerity measures, if applied without care, threaten the foundations we are working to strengthen – early learning, learner support and school nutrition. Reform requires patience, planning and sustained investment. Baobabs do not grow in a single season.

Taken together, these results tell a clear story. The system is more stable. Participation is improving. Inclusion is expanding. Integrity is holding firm.

But the results also confirm the central truth of our reform agenda: without strong foundations in the early years, inequity will always return later.

The new course we have set for the basic education system is defined by deep roots, strong foundations and long vision.

It is focused on quality as much as access, on safer schools through collaboration with SAPS, on ensuring that every child can thrive by the age of five, and on educating a generation capable of claiming Africa's demographic dividend.

This is not a rejection of the past. It is a crossing into new territory – informed by experience, guided by evidence and anchored in foundations strong enough to carry the future.

But government cannot do this work alone. Strengthening the foundations of learning is a national project.

Kubazali bethu, masiqinisekise ukuba abantwana bayafundelwa, ingakumbi ngolwimi lwabo. Masibakhuthaze abantwana bethu basihambe isikolo ukwenzela bagqwese.

To teachers and school leadership: protect learning time, use evidence-based early grade methods and support one another through collaboration and professional learning communities.

To provinces and districts: prioritise ECDs, Foundation Phase staffing, timetables, teacher support and materials, because the early grades are where the future is decided.

And to communities and partners: support early learning and school safety with action and accountability – because when we strengthen the first steps of learning, we change the last outcomes.

To the Class of 2025, I say: congratulations on a record-breaking 88% pass rate.

Siyazingca ngani. Nisebenzile.

You have shown resilience – not only in these examinations, but across years of learning in a country that has asked much of you. South Africa sees you.

And to the learners of our no-fee schools: you have shown the country what is possible. You have proven that talent lives everywhere – and that when we strengthen the roots, hope becomes an outcome, not a slogan.

And to every learner who did not get the result you hoped for: you are not a failure, and your story is not over. There are pathways to improve your results – through rewrites, support programmes and second-chance opportunities. What matters now is that you take the next step, with support, and without shame.

And, finally, to South Africa, I say this: if we plant deeply now, if we strengthen foundations in difficult seasons, then in the years to come, generations will reap the benefits.

I thank you.

Ndiyabulela.

Kea leboga.

Ndo livhuwa (Ndolibuwa).